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Spatial Narrative and Postfeminist Fiction: Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way

Lidan Lin

Although Margaret Drabble’s tenth novel, The Radiant Way (1987), has been almost exclusively interpreted in the context of feminist criticism, the author’s use of spatial narrative trope to give voices to diverse female experiences does not neatly fit the paradigm of feminist fiction. Such paradigm, as Deborah S. Rosenfelt suggests, tends to illustrate a linear “progress from [women’s] oppression . . . victimization . . . [to] awakening,” a progress that usually concludes with female characters’ “reject[i]on of heterosexual love, family, and motherhood” (pp. 269–70). Moving beyond such paradigm in The Radiant Way, Drabble frequently suspends the flow of time in order to juxtapose similar narrative events that take place simultaneously at different locations: New Year’s Eve parties in London and Northam, New Year’s day in different parts of London, and lunches in London, Northam, and New York. Such spatial arrangement of episodes allows Drabble to expand the linear evolution of a monolithic oppression-resistance plot into multiple parallel plots through which she unfolds a variety of female experiences of three friends: Liz Headleand, a successful psychiatrist whose 21-year marriage is falling apart; Alix Bowen, a happily married English instructor and a devoted social worker; and Esther Breuer, an unmarried art historian. By dramatizing the multifarious experiences of these “new women” as Cambridge graduates, career women, mothers, widows, divorcees, and single women, Drabble provides an inclusive network of human relationships through which she...

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1My attempt to point out the feminist trend in the interpretation of The Radiant Way is by no means intended to discredit critics falling in with this trend. On the contrary, their often insightful readings of the novel have inspired and challenged me. Believing that critical boundaries are useful insofar as they remain flexible enough to be redefined and redrawn, I hope to supplement the feminist approach of previous critics by directing attention to the relationship between Drabble’s use of spatial narrative trope and its pervasive postfeminist implications. For more recent feminist interpretations, see, for example, Bromberg, “Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way: Feminist Metafiction”; Rubenstein, “Sexuality and Intertextuality: Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way”; and Guedes “Female Quest Narratives: Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way, A Natural Curiosity, and The Gates of Ivory.”
affirms heterosexual love, motherhood, female friendship, and male–female friendship while revealing the decencies and follies of both sexes.2

While Drabble’s use of spatial narrative trope to represent diverse female experiences and her reluctance to polarize gender relations in The Radiant Way seem unaligned with the feminist narrative chorus of oppression and resistance, the novel shares remarkable formal and ethical kinship with what Rosenfelt3 describes as “postfeminist fiction,” a canon that emerged “in the mid-1980s” as “instructive revisions of the feminist narratives.” Unlike feminist fiction, postfeminist fiction tends “to reinstate heterosexual passion, especially motherhood”; it replaces the feminist “linear . . . narratives”4 with “a multiplicity of plots” that dramatize “the diversity of women’s experiences” so that accounts of these experiences become “more honest and inclusive” (emphasis added).5 While objecting to unequal gender relations and wishing to improve these relations, postfeminist novelists remain suspicious of a monolithic explanation for the objectification of women under the male gaze and refuse “to locate the sources of inequity in the masculine lust for power and control.”6 Politically reflexive and ethically generous, postfeminist novelists emerge with a keen sense of self-awareness that is introspective enough to ponder the “mistakes and totalitarian inclinations among women, and decencies and vulnerability even among men.”7 With Rosenfelt’s help, as I shall argue, we may begin a new reading of The Radiant Way as a postfeminist novel by exploring (1) Drabble’s use of spatial narrative trope to negotiate the politics of identity underlying feminist fiction and her promotion of the postfeminist ethics that lays emphasis on the diversity and complexity of female experiences; and (2) Drabble’s changing relationship with the critical school of feminism and her evolution from a feminist novelist to a postfeminist novelist.

If the turn from the espousal of identity politics to the appeal to ethics indicates a new stage of development in feminist thought, a stage that also signals a transition from feminism to postfeminism, then this significant moment in literary and cultural history must be briefly delineated. The concern of feminist identity politics is largely for the recovery of the female identity or self, lost as a result of the unjust cultural

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2 As Cunningham notes, in “Women and Children First,” 130–52: “Family background, the interaction between parent and child, of husband and wife, or of lovers, provide the basic material of [Drabble’s] novels” (132). She also notes that in dealing with these human relationships, Drabble “consciously embrace[s] . . . the complexities of life” (134) that “demand the forging of personal and individual morality” (134), rather than reduce these relationships to the feminist blueprint of oppression and resistance.


5 Rosenfelt, “Feminism, ‘Postfeminism,’ and Contemporary Women’s Fiction,” 270.


7 Rosenfelt, “Feminism, ‘Postfeminism,’ and Contemporary Women’s Fiction,” 280. Although chiefly revisionary, Rosenfelt sees postfeminism, sometimes called “third-wave feminism,” as a term that “connote[s] not the death of feminism but its uneven incorporation and revision inside the social and cultural texts of a more conservative era.” Like the post- in postmodernism and the post- in postrevolutionary, the post- in postfeminism, for Rosenfelt, “acknowledges the existence of a world and a discourse that have been fundamentally altered by feminism,” 269.
practices of the patriarch. Thus, the female self or ‘I’ becomes the point of view from which ‘I’ conceives of the world, a point of view that, because of its privileged goal of ‘‘safeguard [ing] an identity,’’ is easily susceptible to the exclusion of other points of view. On the other hand, postfeminism, which rests on the premise of ‘‘otherness,’’ is concerned not only with securing an ontological status for the female self but with achieving a balanced growth of the female self and her others—the child, the family, and other relations. Postfeminist ethics therefore belongs to the realm in which ‘‘the claims of otherness . . . are articulated and negotiated’’; it is within this realm that ‘‘selfish’’ or ‘‘narrow’’ considerations are subjected to cancellation, negation, [and] crossing by principles represented as ‘‘deeper’’ and ‘‘higher.’’

Yet, to make full sense of the formal and ethical kinship between The Radiant Way and postfeminist fiction, we must also understand the larger paradigm shift that has shaped the epistemological and ethical contours of postfeminism. Generally speaking, postfeminism “demarcates an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticises many of the fundamental issues advanced by Second Wave feminism.”

Drawing on Lacan’s theory of ‘‘sexuation,’’ postfeminist theorists have come to question two fundamental concepts buttressing the core of feminist theory: the association of female biology and

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9Harpham, Shadows of Ethics, 26.
10Since the paradigm shift in question largely indicates a relationship between second-wave feminism and postfeminism, a quick definition of the former seems to be in order. It refers to “the formation of women’s liberation groups in America, Britain, and Germany in the late 1960s. The term ‘second-wave’ implies that ‘first-wave’ feminism ended in the 1920s” (Brooks, Postfeminisms, 212). Brooks succinctly puts this paradigm shift in perspective: “The ‘paradigm shift’ from feminism to postfeminism can be seen in a number of different directions: first, in the challenges posed by postfeminism to feminism’s epistemological foundationalism; second, in postfeminism’s shift away from specific disciplinary boundaries; and third, in postfeminism’s refusal to be limited by representational constraints” (210). Rather than use the term “waves,” some critics have chosen “generations” to distinguish the stages of development in feminist thought. For two perceptive discussions of generational divisions, see Kaplan “Introduction 2,” 13 – 29; and Kristeva, “Women’s Time.” For more background readings about this paradigm shift, see Phoca and Wright, Introducing Postfeminism.
11Rosenfelt and Stacey, “Second Thoughts,” 341. Like Rosenfelt and Stacey, Rene Denfield takes a revisionary stance; for her, postfeminism “opposes the feminist conception of male bias as rooted in one global institution, that of patriarchy.” For Denfield, one limitation of feminist theory is to reductively characterize society as “patriarchy” and to “lump men together in one undifferentiated class” (quoted in Wright, Lacan and Postfeminism, 10). For more postfeminist critiques of feminism, see Kristeva, “Women’s Time”; Rosenfelt, “Feminism, ‘Postfeminism,’ and Contemporary Women’s Fiction,” 268 – 91; Brooks, Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms; Mitchell, “Introduction I,” 1 – 26; and Rose, “Introduction II,” 27 – 57. For a useful summary of the cultural divide between feminism and postfeminism, see Kalbfleisch, “When Feminism Met Postfeminism,” 250 – 65. For more definitions of postfeminism, see Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, Taking a Postfeminist Stand. 3 Feminist critics, on the other hand, tend to see postfeminism as a backlash against and a betrayal of the hard-won feminist cause (for a discriminating exception to this generalization, see Kaplan, “Introduction 2.” 13 – 29). Russo, “Notes on ‘Post-Feminism,’” 27 – 35, for example, showers her criticism this way: “Postfeminism sounds like an insult, a wounding blow to a hard-won identification of a common cause and lives already under siege by a New Right; at least it sounds like that to some.” She goes on with her objections: “[Postfeminism] identifies with institutional and discursive power that women as a group, even the many exceptional women theorists, do not have. At best, ‘postfeminism’ marks a discursive and theoretical impasse that may release new strategies and narrative that may be, however provisional, utopian and affirming.” Although Koenen, “The (Black) Lady Vanishes,” 131, acknowledges that “postfeminism, diverging from earlier
patriarchal ideology and the identification of the patriarchy as the root cause of male domination. Rejecting Freud’s biological essentialism that explains sexual difference through penis envy and castration anxiety, Lacan shows that sexual identity, like the human subject, is constituted through language, which is always the social speech of the other. The very entrance into the symbolic system submits the sexual subject to ‘‘castration [limitation or prohibition] by language and speech.’’ Lacan calls this castration ‘‘phallic function,’’ which applies to both sexes. Lacan concedes that the construction of sexual identity in the symbolic appears a nebulous process, insofar as woman and man stand the same chance to insert themselves on the male or female side of his diagram of the symbolic logic. However, man tends to identify with the phallic function and imagines himself as ‘‘the master who issues the prohibitions,’’ while woman is unable to identify with it as a universal set, which explains her exclusion from the symbolic logic. This means, for Lacan, that The Universal Woman does not exist because woman is ‘‘not whole . . . with respect to phallic jouissance,’’ which further means that woman with a capital W as ‘‘a singular essence’’ and as ‘‘an all-encompassing idea’’ does not exist. What exists is ‘‘a multiplicity of women, but no essence of ‘Womanhood’ or ‘Womanliness’.’’. While Lacan cannot explain why woman’s side in the symbolic fails to identify with the phallic function as a universal set, he does suggest that woman’s exclusion from the symbolic is not something that ‘‘nature can account for.’’ For Lacan, finally, the problem of woman’s exclusion can be addressed not by nullifying the phallocentric power network permeating all spheres of social life but by constructing ‘‘a different symbolic term . . . or else by an entirely different logic altogether.’’

essentialist and monolithic concepts of ‘woman,’ embraces the idea of gender as a performative rather than biological category,’’ she faults postfeminism for being ‘‘much more preoccupied with the theories of ‘male, pale, Yale’ than those of women of color.’’

These two concepts are generally supported by gender theories. Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud, for example, shows that the anatomic knowledge about sex from the Greeks to Freud is burdened with biased cultural practice in the disguise of science. For an explanation of the relationship between female biology and patriarchal ideology, see Tong, especially ‘‘Biological Sex and Patriarchal Gender’’ 95 – 138.

For an elaboration of how Lacan’s diagram of the symbolic logic works, see Wright, Lacan and Postfeminism, 23 – 32.

For an elaboration of how Lacan’s diagram of the symbolic logic works, see Wright, Lacan and Postfeminism, 27.


Fink, ‘‘On Jouissance,’’ note 28.

Rose, ‘‘Introduction II,’’ note 40.

For detailed discussions of Lacan’s relationship to postfeminism, see Brooks, Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms, 69 – 91. One of the feminist critics’ objections to Lacan’s theory of sexuality is their suspicion of the structuralist model of Lacan’s symbolic, a model that treats language as a system abstracted from the social practice and social context of communication. For Fraser (‘‘The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,’’ 181), for example, the structuralist model of language ‘‘reduces discourse to a ‘symbolic system’’ and, accordingly, ‘‘evacuates social agency, social conflict, and social practice’’. Another is their critique of Lacan’s labeling of phallus as universal signifier; for
Kristeva perceptively links Lacan and the analysis of postfeminist fiction by locating the point where nonlinear narrative forms meet the epistemology and ethics of postfeminism. Based on Lacan’s conclusion that The Universal Woman does not exist, Kristeva revises the feminist “universalist approach” that tends to “globalize the problems of women,” opting, like Rosenfelt, for an emphasis on “the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations, and the differences among the diverse functions or structures which operate beneath this word [woman].” To give voices to these multifaceted functions of the signifier woman, feminist linear time—time as “teleology, linear . . . unfolding”; time as “logic” and “history”—must be revised and replaced by what Kristeva terms “Women’s Time.” Lacan’s disclosure of the epistemological fissure between nature and gender politics encourages Kristeva to endorse the creative power of the maternal body and its “guiltless maternity.” It is from this maternal space that Kristeva derives Women’s Time, which corresponds to the female “biological rhythms” such as “repetition . . . cycles [and] gestation”; it corresponds, finally, to the rhythms of mother “nature.” Lacan’s doubt about the association of the female body and male domination further affords Kristeva the basis to conceive of a postfeminist “new ethics” that calls for a retreat from the feminist politics of anthropomorphic identity. Only in the wake of such retreat, Kristeva insists, can women begin to ponder the question that really matters: “how can we reveal [instead of being excluded from] our place [in the symbolic], first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?”

Kristeva’s illumination of the link between nonlinear narrative and postfeminism lends theoretical support to the analysis of postfeminist fiction described by Rosenfelt. For both authors, feminist linear narrative time—time as logic and history—will not suffice in narrating the multiplicity of plots and, accordingly, the diversity and complexity of female experiences. Both authors thus encourage women novelists to explore alternative, nonlinear narrative forms to account for female experiences that are at once similar yet heterogeneous, irreducible, and even conflicting. Kristeva’s idea of Women’s Time—time as repetition and return—suggests the possibility of an alternative temporal mode for the analysis of them, Lacan simply collaborates with the patriarchy by gendering pre-existing cultural and social relations as dominantly male. In doing so, Lacan tells us that “we cannot ask what determines the place of the phallus as universal signifier . . . [and] leaves us with the alternatives of phallic culture or no culture at all” (Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West, 105). For a polemic response to Fraser’s position, see Aoki, “Using and Abusing French Discourse Theory: Misreading Lacan and the Symbolic Order.”

28Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” 24. However, for Russo, “Notes on ‘Post-Feminism,’” 31, Kristeva’s “assumption of the link between women and mothering” signals yet “another biological retreat.”
postfeminist fiction, yet since Kristeva omits demonstrating how we can apply
Women’s Time to the analysis of a specific postfeminist text, the applicability of
Women’s Time still remains to be worked out at the analytical level. However, in
light of Kristeva’s search for nonlinear narrative forms, Drabble’s experiment with
spatial narrative trope in The Radiant Way offers a viable alternative form of
narration, which, as we shall see, enables her to depict the diverse experiences of Liz,
Alix, and Esther whose stories—not of linear growth and development but of
parallels, conflation, and intersection—offer touching glimpses into the lives of post-
war British women. Spatial narrative form, one might say, permits Drabble to expand
a feminist violin solo of oppression and resistance into a postfeminist polyphony of
“‘unnamable jouissance.’” From a postfeminist point of view, then, Drabble’s
revision of the feminist narrative paradigm opens the avenue to the connection
between spatial narrative and postfeminist fiction. It is this crucial, yet unexplored,
connection that I wish to investigate in this essay.

Drabble begins by spatially juxtaposing five New Year’s Eve parties that
simultaneously take place in metropolitan London and rural Northam. At the
Headleands’ party, which opens the novel, Drabble initially brings out the polyphonic
aspects of the three women’s personal and social lives. Wealthy and successful, Liz
and her husband Charles give a glamorous party in their London mansion, a farewell
party, in a sense, since Charles will soon take a new job in New York. Keeping a
modern marriage, the narrator reveals, Liz and Charles sleep in “separate bedrooms”
and meet for breakfast only “‘at weekends’” (p. 9). And Liz, we are told, has decided
to accompany Charles to New York but to stay and pursue her own career and
inner life. Alix, married, and Esther, single, are invited to the party and have decided
to “‘effect a double entry’” (p. 3). Alix’s habit of being “‘thrift [y]’” even over using
“‘Fluid Foundation’” (p. 2) and Esther’s residence of a “‘small flat’” and her “‘pittance’”
(p. 22) from odd lectures and a little odd teaching suggest that neither woman is as
wealthy as Liz, but despite their different financial status, they remain close friends.
As hostess, Liz receives more narrative attention than her two guest friends; she
moves, throughout the party, “‘from group to group, surveying from the stairway,
engaging and disengaging, tacking and occasionally swooping’” (p. 25). Indeed, when
the gossip involving Charles’s affair with Lady Henrietta leaks out toward the end of
the party, one might assume that Liz is the central character and that the unfolding of
the novel might center upon her sudden mid-life crisis. Yet, since Drabble does not
intend for The Radiant Way to be a feminist novel—to use her words, “‘a women’s

30By suggesting the connection between spatial narrative trope and postfeminist fiction, I do not mean that
spatial organization is unique of postfeminist fiction since such authors as James Joyce, Gustave Flaubert,
and others have appropriated spatial form in their novels for non-postfeminist purposes. What I do want to suggest
is that Drabble’s use of spatial narrative trope clearly enables her to replace the feminist linear narrative of
oppression and resistance identified by Rosenfelt and Kristeva with a multiplicity of plots that grant voices to a
variety of female experiences.
31Margaret Drabble. The Radiant Way. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically
in the text.
book” with a master plot occupying the narrative center—she disrupts the reader’s expectation by halting time temporarily to juxtapose the Headleands’ party with four other celebrations in Northam.

The first celebration takes place in a “Georgian terrace house” (p. 44), where local poets, artists, and musicians gather not to drink champagne, as do Liz’s London guests, but “to laugh, to sing, to eat spinach salad and green bean salad” (p. 44). The second depicts another public gathering in the “fashionable village-suburb of Breasbrough,” where left-wing teachers, journalists, and social workers raise their glasses filled with “Oake and Nephews Special Christmas Offer Beajolais” (p. 45). The third consists of a gathering of family and guests in the home of Eddie Duckworth, where there is “much laughter” (p. 46). The fourth is the family dinner at Liz’s sister Shirley’s home with several relatives from her husband Cliff’s side; they eat, talk, watch television, and play cards. A fifth New Year’s Eve event takes place in Liz’s mother Rita Ablewhite’s home in 8 Abercorn Avenue, where she lies in bed, solitary and sick, hopelessly “waiting for the clock downstairs to strike twelve” (p. 61). Drabble’s spatial juxtaposition of four holiday gatherings and a fifth solitary observance clearly disrupts the linear evolution of the novel. Such disruption allows Drabble to initially shape The Radiant Way into a postfeminist novel by creating an inclusive background against which she introduces the three female protagonists whose rhythms of life will prove so diverse that they cannot be reduced to the feminist monolith of victimization and liberation.

Drabble’s depiction of Liz, Alix, and Esther against a broad background marks her longstanding fascination with the importance of social range in representing women. Insisting that great novelists must exhibit “social conscience” and that great novels must contain “a greater breadth,” Drabble contends that such authors as George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, and Doris Lessing offer a wider social range than, say, Jane Austen and Henry James. In the same interview with Cooper-Clark, Drabble contrasts George Eliot and Jane Austen in praise of the former: “I admire George Eliot so much because she’s so inclusive. She does tackle a very large range of subject matter. And Jane Austen doesn’t. She didn’t care what was going on round the edges of the society that she lived in.” Diverse and inclusive in scope, location, participants, and lifestyles, the multiple party scenes expose the reader to a kaleidoscopic picture of England in an instant of time. The Headleands’ party, which summons 200 guests, from Fleet Street journalists, television moguls, publishers, poets, psychologists, to politicians (p. 8), panoramically dramatizes the social life of middle-class Londoners. The four celebrations in Northam, on the other hand, present a rich mixture of holiday atmospheres in Northern England. By blending the metropolitan and the rural, the city gentry and the country folks, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the ailing, as she does in the opening scene, Drabble suggests that such blending stands a

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32Drabble, “Interview with Kenyon,” 57.
33Drabble, “Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark,” 23.
34Drabble, “Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark,” 23.
better chance to illustrate “the simultaneity of goings-on” and “the wholeness of our experience,” of which female experiences constitute a large important part. Roger Bowen has noted Drabble’s gradually “enlarged canvas” and her evolution from a chronicler of “northern provincial life and London’s metropolitan culture” in her early novels to a chronicler of “contemporary Britain” in her mid-career novels, and further to a chronicler of a global “postcolonial holocaust” in The Gates of Ivory (1992). As Drabble expands her novelistic vision, she “begins to diagnose a condition of the world rather than a condition of England.” And such condition of the world has already been anticipated in The Radiant Way, the first in the trilogy that continued with A Natural Curiosity (1989) and ends with The Gates of Ivory, by Drabble’s prediction that “the eighties [will be] the global decade.”

After initially revealing the three women’s polyphonic profiles, Drabble goes on to dramatize the heterogeneous rhythms governing their daily lives by juxtaposing how Liz and Alix spend their New Year’s day. Liz’s activities disclose a committed psychiatrist whose career revolves round seeing patients and attending seminars and conferences on the one hand, and a troubled woman suffering an unexpected setback in her personal life on the other. The reader learns that Liz has been invited to give a paper that day on Spenser’s version of the family romance at a conference organized by Japanese psychologists and psychotherapists. But all day, even when she is “deliver[ing] her own paper” (p. 65), she is painfully disturbed by the thought of a divorce. She keeps pondering and wondering what she could have done to keep Charles from being stolen by Lady Henrietta. What has been lacking in her that Charles has found in that lady, “the most boring woman in Britain” (p. 40)? Has she really neglected him? But how can you neglect someone who is never there? What would their children say to their divorce? What sort of “negotiations” (p. 64) will she and Charles have? Arriving home “exhausted and demoralized” (p. 65), she calls Alix to break to her the harrowing news of the scandalous affair.

Although also a working day, Alix’s New Year’s day presents a contrast to Liz’s. Happily married to Brian Bowen, Head of Humanities at an adult education college, Alix begins her day with Brian’s deft handling of their old car and his ensuing hugging, light teasing, and caring reminder for her to “drive carefully” (p. 67). The reader learns that, unlike Liz’s day given to a high-profile conference, Alix’s day is spent at the

40Greene, “Bleak Houses: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and the Condition of England,” 314, also notes that “The Radiant Way offers a wider . . . panorama of English society, encompassing north and south, working class, middle class, professional and business classes.” Interestingly, Drabble’s evolution from a regional novelist to a more global novelist parallels the changes in her life as a woman. The fact that her early novels contain domestic motifs connected with babies has to do with her own “pregnancies” (“Interview with Kenyon,” 45) and with the life of a mother. When her children grew up, she could “do research and travel” (“Interview with Kenyon,” 46) and actually went to India, Japan, New Zealand, and other places. The broadening of Drabble’s cultural horizon has clearly enlarged the subject matter of her middle and late novels.
Garfield Center, where she teaches English literature once a week, with “a bunch of [female] prisoners” (p. 67). The reader also learns that Alix’s work at the Garfield is purely motivated by her lofty “aspiration” to “make connections” (p. 68) between seemingly isolated human lives, since the job hardly pays for the gas. From the houses of Wanley, Leeds, Northam, and the Garfield Center, Alix sometimes glimpses “a vaster network . . . which was humanity itself” (p. 68). Within this network, each individual becomes a part of a whole, which has its distinct, its other meaning. The individuals, for Alix, become “crossroads, meeting places . . . signs, conjunctions, aggregations” (p. 69). Alix’s day closes with a happy scene in which she joins Brian and their son, Sam, who are watching television. Esther, who appears on the second day of the New Year, shares neither the advantages nor disadvantages of marriage; hers is a world filled with her obsession with medieval European vegetation and with her love of Italy. Drabble’s parallel accounts of Liz’s and Alix’s New Year’s day, followed by the brief account of Esther, vividly illustrate a broad spectrum of female experiences: Liz’s flourishing career and her marriage crisis, Alix’s devotion to social work and her happy marriage, and Esther’s unmarried yet peaceful life. Inscribed with pains, tears, happiness, and serenity, such multitude of female experiences, following the multiple party scenes, further disperses the feminist monolith of oppression and resistance.

The pattern of parallel plots continues after Drabble moves the narrative ahead by one day; here, she again suspends time by devoting a flashback to the three women’s family background, their formative years in Cambridge, and their variegated professional experiences. Because these plots are placed in close temporal proximity—they always move forward in a parallel fashion and always keep pace with one another—they seem more like tales of variety and simultaneity than tales of linearity and separation. Growing up in rural Northam with a lunatic mother and an absent father, Liz came to Cambridge “pale and fair and thin” (p. 81) and spent her holidays in Northam reading “Victorian novels, . . . textbooks of anatomy . . . [and] Freud” (p. 84). She also read the Book of Job, hoping that her early suffering would one day be paid back, as “light was given to [Job] in misery, and life to the bitter in soul” (p. 84). Raised by her socialist-minded parents, Alix grew up with a strong conviction to socialist ideals and spent her holidays “working . . . for no pay . . . in a suburb of Paris” (p. 84). A Jewish refugee, Esther spent her early childhood huddling together with her brother and mother in “a boarding house in Manchester” (p. 88) while her father was trying to escape from Berlin. The three women also traveled similar yet different paths in their personal lives. Both Alix and Liz loved and married during their years at Cambridge, and both soon found that they had married the wrong men, but compared with Liz’s path, Alix’s was a more trying one. Pregnant after three months of her first marriage to a man she no longer loved, Alix was soon widowed and had to raise their son all by herself—her husband had suddenly drowned in the swimming pool. Spending the next few years in hardship, tears, and solitude (pp. 93 – 94), Alix nonetheless refused to accept the sympathy and pity of her in-laws and her own parents. Liz’s first marriage to Edgar Lintot, who believed that his work was always more important than hers (p. 94), fell apart after eight months.
Esther, who remained single, continued to dine with academics and architects; at the same time, she embarked on an “enigmatic liaison” (p. 95) with a married Italian anthropologist who taught her how to interpret medieval Italian iconography.

Rather than alienating them, these women’s divergent background and personal lives cultivate in them a sense of solidarity, a sense that although “they have all lived on the margins of English life [and been] outsiders” (p. 84), they have all proved successful in Cambridge. Such different yet similar experiences further cast an impact on the ways they understand and interpret the world and on their choices of profession. Liz likes “to make sense of things, to understand. By things she meant herself. Or she thought she meant herself” (p. 81). Alix would like to “change things.” By things she did not mean herself. Or thought she did not mean herself” (p. 81).

Esther would like “to acquire interesting information. That is all” (p. 81). Accordingly, Liz becomes a psychiatrist and asks questions about the self; Alix becomes a part-time social worker and teaches English literature to female inmates to change them; Esther, in search of edifying information, becomes an art historian.

While acknowledging the relevance of talent, industry, and luck41 to these women’s academic success, Drabble suggests that their success bears witness to the changing force of history. Certainly, Drabble well understands the institutional bias that traps women in post-war British society, and such traps are often the subject of her early novels. But Drabble also celebrates the many positive changes that have altered these flawed institutions, changes that enable her female characters to live lives “very different from their nineteenth-century counterparts,” lives “women have never lived before.”42 Drabble emphasizes these changes by contrasting Jane Austen’s provincial and domestic heroines with her own mobile and Cambridge-educated new women, a contrast strategically maneuvered to bring the force of history to bear on the new social conditions surrounding post-war British women. One important change is the availability to women of equal opportunity for higher education and scholarships, a reality simply unimaginable for Austen and merely a dream for Virginia Woolf.

When Woolf published Three Guineas (1938), the opportunity of higher education for middle-class women, let alone for working-class women, in England was “still strictly limited.”43 As Woolf writes: “If we measure the money available for scholarships at the men’s colleges with the money available for their sisters at the women’s colleges, we shall save ourselves the trouble of adding up and come to the conclusion that the colleges for the sisters of educated men are, compared with their brothers’ colleges, unbelievably and shamefully poor.”44 It is no wonder that Drabble’s sense of history as a shaping force of her female characters’ destiny echoes Woolf’s conviction that “the novel is never written by the author, but by the combined determinants of class, gender, and historical moment.”45

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41 Bokat, The Novels of Margaret Drabble, 140.
43 Woolf, Three Guineas, 44.
44 Woolf, Three Guineas, 44.
Aided by the improved social milieu of “Welfare State and County Scholarships, of equality for women,” Liz, Alix, and Esther all flourished in Cambridge and enjoyed “plenty of opportunities” (p. 83) thereafter. For Drabble, they emerge as “the elite, the chosen, the garlanded of the great social dream” (p. 83), more empowered than their 19th-century predecessors, who, in Austen’s day, “would never have met . . . in Cambridge” (79). Indeed, unlike Austen’s women, who rarely venture to trespass the village boundary, Drabble’s move around globally: Liz attends conferences in Japan, Esther travels to Italy, and even the less mobile Alix relocates to Northam toward the end of the novel. Unlike Austen’s women, whose adult lives are either blessed by marriage or stigmatized by spinsterhood, Liz, Alix, and Esther manage not to let marital relationships control their fate. Though distracted by her first divorce and by Charles’s affair, Liz twice pulls herself together and pursues her career quite efficiently. Even though Liz finds it extremely hard to take Charles’s denial of her, she knows that she has “plenty to get on with” (p. 62); after all, she has “a brilliant career . . . [and] a dozen children” (p. 121) still loving her. She even regrets being upset and “having burst into tears” (p. 62). Like Liz, Alix manages to move on after the sudden death of her first husband. Although living on scraps from her part-time teaching jobs and struggling against poverty, Alix refuses to succumb; she “renounced the role of tragic widow with an austerity that irritated her would-be saviors” (p. 96). Esther, who remains unmarried, devotes her time mainly to academic and social activities. Accordingly, Liz’s quick recovery from her two marital muddles, Alix’s ability to survive as a single mother, and Esther’s choice to remain single suggest that marriage, the institution that once controlled the salvation or damnation of Austen’s “traditional” women, has lost a great deal of its power over Drabble’s “new” women.

An individual’s willingness to struggle against the limitations of circumstances and fate is yet another element enabling the independence of the three women. Commenting on Rose Vassilou in The Needle’s Eye (1972), Marion V. Libby remarks that after The Waterfall (1969), Drabble began to portray female characters “whose beauty and strength consist precisely in a struggle against the preordained circumstances.” As we have seen, neither Liz, nor Alix, nor Esther comes from a well-to-do family; their path to academic success is paved precisely by good education and hard work. As Liz’s sister Shirley recalls, Liz used to shut herself up to study for exams and “stuck grimly to her books and her duty and her long-term plans” (p. 46) while Shirley was indulging in cosmetics and sex. For Drabble, as for her successful heroines, the radiant way begins, as she recalls in her essay “The Radiant Way and After,” with incessant brain work, in her case, reading and writing at home or on trips (p. 115). The radiant way, as Libby suggests, signals the triumph of “the force of individual will” against “the bounds of circumstance” (p. 176).

The force of history and individual will are further supplemented by these women’s support network, woven and nurtured by their friendship. As years elapse, the bonds that link them “grow deeper and more pervasive, embodying Alix’s

46Libby, “Fate and Feminism in the Novels of Margaret Drabble,” 176.
Woolfian conviction that human personality is a process, at once fluid and interconnected." This conviction represents Alix’s more mature perception of human relationships: “She had once thought of herself as unique, had been encouraged to believe . . . in the individual self . . . but as she grew older she increasingly questioned these concepts—seeing people . . . as a vast network, which was humanity itself” (p. 69). The three friends’ residences in London enable them to gather for lunches, teas, and walks (pp. 104, 231, 314, 374) and to nourish their friendship to such an extent that they become reliant on, and trustful of, one another. Saddened by Charles’s affair, for example, Liz expects to draw much support from her two oldest and closest friends. When Liz rings Alix, she believes that “in speaking to Alix her voice would find its normal level, her mind would return to its normal tune” (p. 65). Transcending relationships defined by, for example, blood ties, family ties, legal ties, sexual liaisons, and self-interest-related ties, their friendship is based on pure “powerful human bonds” that require no biological ties and obligation-bound contracts; mutual appreciation and trust are all their friendship takes to perpetuate itself.

Clearly, Drabble shares feminist novelists’ notions of female solidarity as an inspiring source of support. However, Drabble does not reduce, as they do, female bonding to a monolithic gesture to “sever the connections between culture and biology, between reproduction, sexuality, and mothering.” Rather, Drabble situates female friendship within an inclusive network of human relationships that can be equally enhancing and nourishing. Keenly alert to the gloomy status of modern marriage, Drabble nonetheless believes that marriage is not, as some feminist novelists would have us believe, an institution perpetuating the Rule of the Father. Alix’s happy marriage to Brian, the “ideal husband” who can handle everything from “garden spades [and] power drills” to “her warm body” as his “friends and allies” (p. 67), proves quite rewarding. Liz’s divorce with Charles, on the other hand, falls short of indicating the triumph of the male partner’s lust for power. Rather, their breakup suggests the possible outcome of the modern marriage of a career couple. Moreover, Liz’s decision not to follow Charles to New York, where his new job awaits him, indirectly foments the divorce: “Nobody expected Liz to uproot herself, like a woman, a wife, and follow her husband to America: she was expected to stay where she was, pursuing her career and pursuing her own inner life” (p. 9). While depicting Charles’s affair with Lady Henrietta, Drabble also exposes Liz’s affairs with several men: “Roy . . . Philip, and Jules. She had finished with them all” (p. 13). Even Esther’s

47Rubenstein, “Sexuality and Intertextuality: Margaret Drabble’s The Radiant Way,” 98.
48Bokat, The Novels of Margaret Drabble, 149.
49Rosenfelt, “Feminism, "Postfeminism,"”, 277.
50I note that Drabble’s representation of happy heterosexual relationships tends to trouble critics. For Fox-Genovese (“The Ambiguities of Female Identity: A Reading of The Novels of Margaret Drabble,” 235), for example, Drabble’s non-antagonistic perception of gender relations suggests a “retreat to masculinity or androgyny.” For Beards (“Margaret Drabble: Novels of a Cautious Feminist,” 40), on the other hand, Drabble’s portrayal of single women “without marriage or male dominance . . . suggests a growth in the author’s feminist consciousness.”
quasi-adulterous relationships with two married men seem reasonably healthy and harmless; she even befriends the wife and sister of one of the suitors."  

Not only do the three women derive solace from the affectionate solidarity of the same sex, but they draw emotional and spiritual support from male friends, especially when life turns tough. Stephen Cox, whom Liz can “trust,” and who would never “impose” (p. 242), “proves a useful ally” (p. 243) and “a pleasant escort” (p. 242) when she worries that the break-up of her marriage might “portend a life of solitary and uninvited neglect” (p. 242), and indeed, when her “snobbish” friends drop her and “forget her existence” (p. 243), Stephen continues to correspond and dine with Liz; to cheer her up, he even “takes Liz to the theater to see Hilda Stark play Hedda Gabler” (p. 243). Their friendship further grows in The Gates of Ivory, in which Stephen invites Liz to join him in exotic Cambodia. Alix befriends Otto Werner, her colleague at the Garfield Center, with whom she shares her feelings of “despair” and “hopeless [ness]” (p. 341) when her husband faces possible unemployment. Their friendship almost deepens into “love” (p. 301), and they linger, for a while, on the verge of “a wonderful disaster” (p. 301). Yet, being “serious people, seriously married” (p. 300), Alix and Otto manage to save their marriages and avoid the disaster. Esther, in her own way, discovers in Claudio Volpe, the learned Italian anthropologist, “the great [spiritual] love of her life” (p. 328), with whom she forges a “mystic intimacy” (p. 273) that lasts until Claudio’s death.

Drabble returns to spatial trope again after the flashback section using lunch as a narrative occasion to further bring out the diversity of the three women’s lives. But the lunch episode here expands that diversity to the broader realm of human lives by juxtaposing the lunches of the three women with those of other characters. Through Liz’s musing over her lunch, Drabble reveals another aspect of Liz’s inner life troubled earlier by her “sexual fantasies” (p. 132) of her father and now by her “sexual jealousy” of Charles’s lover and her “doubts” (p. 135) about herself. Unlike the moody Liz, Esther is having a good day because she received an invitation that morning to Bologna to “deliver her opinion on the authenticity of a painting possibly by Carlo Crivelli himself, possibly by his brother Vittore” (p. 138). Alix spends most of her lunch hour shopping for the dinner she is to present to Liz and Stephen Cox; she buys a piece of pie to eat in her office after she is done with her shopping. Alix’s activity reinforces her commitment to social work by revealing her involvement in the Home Office that deals with the care and control of women offenders. Shirley eats her lunch at her Northam home, an episode that reveals her frustration with her

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One notes that adulterous and quasi-adulterous relationships are familiar scenarios in Drabble’s novels. Some of these relationships are harmless to the extent that they cause no problems for the parties involved as in the Frances – Karel affair in The Realms of Gold and the Kate – Ted affair in The Middle Ground, while others are less so as in the Charles – Henrietta affair in The Radiant Way, which causes Liz a great deal of pain. For Drabble, both types of affairs are what happens in real life, and for her, truth is more important than ideology. In the interview with John Hannay (“Margaret Drabble: An Interview,” 148), Drabble expresses her uneasiness with feminist critics’ expectation of how she should write her novels: “I don’t like the way the feminists think I ought to be writing a blueprint for everybody’s life. I don’t see that at all.”
underemployment and her boredom (p. 141) with tedious domestic duties; both have rubbed away her desire for libraries and books. Her husband Cliff eats his lunch at a local pub. Here Drabble presents Cliff as a successful businessman whose wing-mirror company continues to prosper while other small businesses have been hit by the impending recession. Finally, Charles’s quick work lunch, which he eats in his New York office, is suggestive of his hectic cosmopolitan lifestyle; while eating, he makes business calls to “Los Angeles, Detroit, Washington, Bogota” (p. 146) and “Toronto” (p. 147).

Drabble’s use of such basic activity as lunch to link the lives of the three women and those related to them within a global context further revises the feminist linear plot of oppression and resistance. Here, the diversity of female experiences in particular and human experiences in general is demonstrated by means of food and by the manners in which it is consumed. Both shed light on a variety of personalities and lifestyles, male and female, rural and cosmopolitan. Writing about the function of parallel plots, Mieke Bal\(^52\) remarks: “[T]he elaboration of parallel strings of one fabula makes it difficult to recognize one single chronological sequence in that fabula. Several events happen at the same time.” The disappearance of the chronology of one single event, as shown by the spatial presentation of the parties, New Year’s Day, and the lunches, makes the reading experience analogous to watching television programs or films presented in the montage mode.\(^53\) One recalls CNN’s “Millennium 2000,” an exclusive program broadcasting millennium celebrations around the world. One way CNN handled this program was by juxtaposing the midnight cheering of several nations; what the audience saw on the television screen was a mosaic picture of fireworks and cheering crowds: fireworks shot centrifugally from the Eiffel Tower, exploding over The River Thames, coloring the skies of Beijing, New Delhi, and Tokyo, and so forth. CNN’s juxtaposition of multiple cheering scenes emphasizes how diverse peoples in their different manners—dancing different dances, shouting different greetings, and consuming different liquids—simultaneously celebrate the entrance into the new millennium.

This striking parallel between spatial narrative trope and the montage technique inevitably calls into question the dominant critical tradition that regards linear ordering as the primary organizing principle of the novel. Because of M. M. Bakhtin’s influential authority on the theory of the novel, his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” typically illustrates this tradition. Bakhtin identifies “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships”\(^54\) as an important generic feature of narrative literature. For Bakhtin, as Danow notes, time and space in

\(^{52}\)Bal, 213.  
\(^{53}\)The disappearance of a linear master plot in The Radiant Way also makes the novel analogous to what Sandra Zagarell (“Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” 503) calls “narratives of community” that “ignore linear development or chronological sequence.” Such narratives of community, popular in nineteenth-century literature, “tend to be episodic, built primarily around the continuous small-scale negotiations and daily procedures through which communities sustain themselves.”  
\(^{54}\)Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 84.
narrative literature are “indispensable and inseparable,” always fused into an artistic whole because the change of space always implies the movement of time, and Bakhtin terms this whole “chronotope.” As Bakhtin states, “[I]n literature and art, temporal and spatial relations are inseparable from one another,” and this inseparableness constitutes a literary work’s artistic unity in relation to an actual reality. Yet, as my analysis of Drabble’s spatial trope in The Radiant Way suggests, time in narrative literature can indeed be separated from space, and the movement of space does not necessarily involve the movement of time, as Bakhtin claims. Joseph Frank’s study of spatial form also questions the adequacy of Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope. Frank shows that such authors as Gustave Flaubert “ideally intend the reader to apprehend their works spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.” To explain his point, Frank refers to Flaubert’s county fair scene in Madame Bovary to show that Flaubert dramatizes three levels of action simultaneously in one scene: “the surging, jostling mob in the street, mingling with the livestock brought to the exhibitions . . . the speechmaking officials, bombastically reeling off platitudes to the attentive multitudes . . . and Rodolphe and Emma . . . watching the proceedings and carrying on their amorous conversation . . .” Frank succinctly concludes:

This scene illustrates, on a small scale, what we mean by the spatialization of form in a novel. For the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted; attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the immobilized time-area. These relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative, and the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relations among the units of meaning.

Although Flaubert appropriates spatial form not for postfeminist purposes, as Drabble does, he certainly shares her belief in the interconnectedness and wholeness of human experience. What connects these two authors is their common fascination with the significance of the diversity and simultaneity of actions and events. To quote Flaubert: “One should hear the bellowing of cattle, the whispering of the lovers, and the rhetoric of the officials all at the same time” because for Flaubert, as for Drabble, “a knowledge of the whole is essential to an understanding of any part.”

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56Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 84.
57Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 243.
58Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 10.
59Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 16.
60Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 17.
61Quoted in Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 17.
62Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 21. In addition to Madame Bovary, Frank also analyses Joyce’s Ulysses and Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood. For discussions of these works, see Frank, The Idea of Spatial Form, 18 – 21, 28 – 53. For an additional analysis of Flaubert’s use of spatial form in Trois Contes, see Selvin, “Spatial Form in Flaubert’s Trois Contes.” For a critique of Frank’s theory of spatial form, see Kermode, “A Reply to Joseph Frank.” For background readings on spatial form, see Smitten and Daghistany, Spatial Form in Narrative.
While Drabble’s use of spatial narrative trope to emphasize the diversity of female experiences and her appositive, rather than antagonistic, perception of gender relations in *The Radiant Way* strongly suggest this author’s kinship with postfeminism, they also clearly signal her ongoing negotiations with the critical school of feminism she previously endorsed and, hence, her evolution from a feminist novelist to a postfeminist novelist. There is little doubt that Drabble’s early novels register the influence of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which she read during her last year at Cambridge. Novels such as *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1962), *The Garrick Year* (1964), and *The Millstone* (1965) largely present a feminist anatomy that exposes women’s predicament in a male-dominated world with “narrow choices for educated women”.63 Sarah Bennett in *A Summer Bird-Cage*, for example, confronts the choice of a loveless marriage or a boring academic career after graduating from Oxford.64 Drabble’s middle and late novels, however, display a more mature novelist no longer certain of her early feminist analysis of women’s plight. As Ellen Rose notes, *The Needle’s Eye* (1972) “divid[es] her [Drabble’s] career quite neatly in two”;65 thereafter, Drabble began tackling “broader themes” that are not “limited to the situation of women,” themes that include “strong male characters, the effect of heredity and environment on character, or the condition of England.”66 In the 1987 interview with Cooper-Clark, the same year she published *The Radiant Way*, Drabble advised women novelists to guard against the epistemological delusions of sexism and narcissism and spoke of her reservations about the narrowness of feminist fiction: “In some of my books I’ve tried to avoid writing as a woman because it does create its own narrowness. . . . I’m not at all keen on the view that there is a male conspiracy to put women down. Both sexes are at fault. . . . I think [motherhood is] the greatest joy in the world.”67

To avoid the narrowness of feminist fiction, Drabble began to look for more inclusive narrative modes to represent women, an effort that parallels her experiment with spatial narrative trope in her post-1972 novels. In *The Realms of Gold* (1976), for example, Drabble tackles the diversity and complexity of female experiences by including women of different sexual orientations, among whom are Frances Wingate, a successful university professor, a single mother, and an adulteress, and Joy Schmidt who eventually leaves her husband and children to live in “a lesbian commune” (p. 351). For Drabble, Frances’s and Joy’s choices of sexual orientation suggest neither their surrender nor resistance to male supremacy; rather, their choices are based on their needs as sexual subjects and individuals. While Joy is fed up with

63Bokat, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble*, 142.
64Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble*, 3.
65Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble*, 4.
67Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble*, 5.
68Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble*, 4.
69Drabble, “Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark,” 19.
70Drabble, “Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark,” 21.
71Drabble, “Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark,” 28.
heterosexuality and traditional family life and finds love in her partner Vera. Frances is much drawn to these two modes of life and finds true love in Joy’s husband Karel. Through Karel’s and Frances’s hard-won yet productive love relationship, Drabble shows that Karel, like Frances, is capable of serious love, even when he acts as an unfaithful husband. On one occasion, Drabble juxtaposes the activities of Frances and Karel to show the quality of attachment of two lovers: “While Frances Wingate sat in her parents’ sitting room gazing over the darkening wastes, fobbing off her parents with some account of their grandson . . . (why should they be given her true feelings [for Karel]?), Schmidt sat in his room at the Polytechnic, staring at a pile of essays, and thought of Frances Wingate” (p. 90).

In The Middle Ground (1980), Drabble continues to dramatize the diversity and complexity of female experiences by including progressive and traditional women. Drabble also manipulates spatial narrative more prominently. A successful journalist who believes in women’s freedom and independence, Kate Armstrong refuses to sacrifice her talent and career for her family and divorces her unfaithful husband. For Mary J. Elkins, Kate represents an exemplary “woman with everything . . . a self-made woman,” who, having conquered her uncompromising beginnings, has created a life for herself.”72 Evelyn Stennett, a devoted social worker, on the other hand, holds conservative views about marriage and family. Well aware of her husband’s affair with Kate, Evelyn willingly puts up with him; she even tries to hide her knowledge of the affair for fear it may “destroy the delicate equilibrium that balanced [the three of] them” (p. 55). For Evelyn, a loveless marriage offers striking advantages in that the partners share “a kind of cracked solidarity, a worn peacefulness, like an old white plate,” which she does not want to throw away “when it still served” (p. 149). Drabble further brings out Kate’s and Evelyn’s diverse rhythms of life by frequently juxtaposing the activities of both characters. On one occasion, Drabble juxtaposes how Kate and Evelyn handle dinners. While Kate takes her family to dinner at the Tai Mahal, a reasonable arrangement by a single working mother, Evelyn is playing the role of a sweet hostess “dishing up chicken in lemon sauce” to her “slightly jet-lagged husband” (p. 209). After dinner, Evelyn is content with sleeping “on her side of the bed” separated from her husband’s side by “a slope” made by her effort to “keep well away from [him] at night” (p. 214). As Elkins perceptively notes, spatial narrative in The Middle Ground “takes up to one-third of the novel; for over one hundred pages, the major characters live separately, but not entirely unrelated and within the same time period, a period elongated by repetition and by transitions which stress the simultaneity.”74

74Elkins, “Alenoushka’s Return: Motifs and Movement in Margaret Drabble’s The Middle Ground,” 171. In addition to Davis and Elkins, Lay has written on Drabble’s application of spatial narrative trope. My own analysis of The Radiant Way is encouraged by these critics; at the same time, however, my analysis breaks new ground by illuminating the crucial relationship between spatial narrative trope and postfeminist fiction.
From A Summer Bird-Cage through The Realms of Gold and The Middle Ground to The Radiant Way, we perceive a clear trajectory of Drabble’s ongoing negotiations with the critical school of feminism. From Sarah Bennett through Frances Wingate, Joy Schmidt, Kate Armstrong, Evelyn Stennett to Liz Headland, Alix Bowen, and Esther Breuer, we can trace Drabble’s continuing efforts to explore new ways to represent women. Drabble’s aspiration for more inclusive narrative modes to account for the diversity and complexity of women’s experiences has clearly led her to produce the kind of novels no longer readily susceptible to a feminist interpretation aimed chiefly at exposing unequal gender relations accountable for women’s dilemma in post-war British society. The very complexity of these novels thus demands new interpretations that are equally inclusive, interpretations that will help us understand the many heterogeneous, fluctuating, and even conflicting meanings that punctuate the signifier female—as ‘mother, woman, hysteric . . .’ By revealing the formal and ethic kinship of The Radiant Way to postfeminist fiction and by illuminating Drabble’s evolution from a feminist novelist to a postfeminist novelist, this essay has suggested strategies that shed light on how a new postfeminist interpretation of Drabble’s novels in particular and of contemporary women’s fiction in general can be pursued.

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